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I must have been staring

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Johnson, Wayne Douglas, "I must have been staring" (1985). *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*. 91.
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I must have been staring

by

Wayne Douglas Johnson

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Approved:

In Charge of Major Work

For the Major Department

For the Graduate College

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1985

This thesis has been accepted by the Department of English in lieu of the research thesis prescribed by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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EVEN NOW, I SEE

We crouched, my sister and I,
hands poised
for the quick thrust
into the luke-warm
water, grass, and mud.

And that ditch-side water,
so warm and smelling of last year's lawns,
oozed around my toes
in my high-topped
Keds.

She smiled at me
with those braces on her teeth,
pulled back her pony tail and
pointed to the rippling water at my feet.

I could see his eyes,
little black-centered bronze marbles,
gliding on the surface
of the drainage ditch puddle
like marsh-gas bubbles.

Then splash!
And I searched wildly in that
tepid water, feeling snails,
twigs, papery leaves,

trying to connect,
grasp without breaking,
that slippery swimmer.

And finally, clenching
a slick leg between
thumb and index finger,
I had one.

Woosh! And I pulled
out of the water
a smiling,
shining,
metallic green and brown
frog,
staring, like me, out of wondering eyes.

WHAT REMAINS

Flies, those little gray ones with the waxy, yellow abdomens, are everywhere, crawling across my legs on their way to the muskmelon rind on the porch railing; a few of them stop long enough to bite. Then I turn and--WHACK!--slap the spot where a half-second before one ripped out a tiny piece of my flesh, ripped it out....

A breeze rattles the leaves in the maple trees on the boulevard, and tugs at the crumpled stationery in my hand. I flatten the pages over my knee and read the last part of her letter one more time,

"You've been a huge part of my life. You know me better than anyone. We've built some good things together, but right now I think I can build more with Dan. What do you think of trying something new?"

She can go to hell, that's what I think. I should never have asked her to come over for dinner, not while she was still seeing him. I fold the letter up and stuff it in my shirt pocket. A bum, stoop-shouldered and swinging his right arm at his side, sings a Jesus song as he shuffles down the sidewalk: "Though none go with Him, still I will follow. No turning back, no turning back." A '66 Imperial, red and badly rusted, is parked across the street in front of Culla's Tavern. In the bay window under the Pabst Blue Ribbon sign, two men argue. The older of the two, bald but for a patch of grey behind his ears, shakes his fist. I can hardly see them through the reflection of my house, the clapboard siding bright white in the evening sun.

I shiver, and rub my arms, too lazy to go into the house to get my

jacket. I take a sip of the Budweiser I've opened and watch a fly suck juice out of the orange and brown melon rind on the porch railing. I take another sip of the beer, bitter, cold, and prop my feet up beside the rind. I hate waiting.

The neighbor's kid, Joey, pedals by on his bike, a red book-bag slung over his handlebars. I wave to him.

"Hey, Mr. Avery!" he yells back.

I set my beer down on the railing and lean forward. These contact lenses I just got are hell on my eyes, and with them on I can't see worth a damn, not yet anyway. I figured I'd look better without my glasses, wouldn't have "little pig eyes"; she said that the night we fought over my quitting the job. She didn't have to work with that son-of-a-bitch Harker and his pigeons; she didn't have to take all that departmental crap, the students asleep in class, the competition for tenure.

Joey turns up my driveway. I'm sure he wants to know if I've got his mini-bike running yet. He pedals across the lawn, now dead and brown from the September drought. A few feet from the porch he wobbles so much he nearly falls.

"Watcha doin' there, Mr. Avery?" he says, rocking on the bike seat. "You finish that car you were working on last week?"

Joey likes to talk while I'm busy with the cars. Usually I've got foreign ones, MG's, Healey's, and now and then an old Mercedes. I had a Jaguar, and thought I could keep it, but like the others, it had to go when I couldn't make rent. Since Rosemary left it's been good to have Joey around. He's always joking. Last week it was dead baby jokes.

It hurts to see how he watches my face, hoping I'll laugh.

There's a girl Joey's nuts about; he told me himself.

"Boy, I'd sure like it if Rachael'd dance with me at the teen-hop," he said. "She's real neat, and she's smart too."

"Come on Joey, admit it, you're in love," I said, smiling at him from under the hood of Rosemary's VW.

Joey's cheeks reddened.

The day Rachael told Joey no about the teen-dance he came over, his eyes glassy. I told him about Cathy Carlson in seventh grade, how I was going to marry her, but she went off with Harold Boehmer with the buck teeth. He laughed, tears streaming down his cheeks. Couldn't say a thing.

Like the day I met him. He was yanking the starter cord on the Rupp. Ninety-degree heat. Des Moines humidity. Sweat. I'd never seen anyone sweat like that--his t-shirt was plastered to his skin, transparent. I walked across his folk's lawn to the driveway to see if I could help.

The Rupp was a damned mess and I told him so. No spark, no compression. Anyway, Joey wouldn't look up at me. He wiped his nose, like he had a cold, and then he stammered, got a few words out before his voice quavered so bad he had to stop. From what he said I made out that, one, he'd bought the bike with his paper route money; two, the kid he bought the bike from said all it needed was a spark plug; and three, Joey's dad laughed when he brought the Rupp home. Four months of hard work gone.

I tried not to laugh. It must have been fifteen years ago that I spent my first two paper-route checks on a worthless go-cart frame; my dad threw it in with the garbage after it sat in the back yard all summer. Eighty bucks worth of scrap iron.

So here Joey is wanting to know if I got his Rupp running yet. I look down at my watch. Half past six.

"No, Joey, it isn't done." I force myself up from the lawn chair; "But you've got to see this."

Joey follows me out to the garage behind my house, talking about the accelerated math class he's in. He rambles on about the calculator he got for his birthday, and I'm thinking about my twenty-third, the surprise party, how they jumped to the door, all handshakes; and silent, she stood behind them, wearing her black skirt and white cotton blouse, the one that made her eyes so green. She held a small package in her hand--The Little Prince--her head tilted to one side, her lips twisted into a smile, so sad. I hoped she could forget what I'd said the week before, that she wasn't beautiful enough, because I knew, then, it wasn't true.

At the garage I unlock the door and reach inside to flip on the overhead light. I smell dry-rotted wood, oil, dust, and gasoline. Against one wall my tool chest is laid out: open-end wrenches, socket wrenches, impact drivers, all chrome plated. On my work bench I've got the Rupp's Tecumseh motor bolted down.

"Gee," Joey says, his head craned to one side as if he expects the ceiling to collapse at any second, "I thought you said you were gonna

fix the roof." One beam is broken, sagging toward the door.

Joey runs over to the workbench and picks up the Rupp's old piston, sticky with dirty oil, looks at the hole in it, sets it down, and wipes his hands on his Washington Monument t-shirt. Black streaks. His mother will love me for that. I check my watch again, catch the glare of the two-hundred watt bulb overhead in the watch crystal. Nearly six forty. My dinner, simmering on the stove, must be mush by now.

"Jees, what happened to it?" Joey says.

The Rupp's wheels hang from the south wall on wooden dowels, and the frame, covered by a layer of greasy dust, lies on its side by some old tires.

"You'll be surprised," I say, smiling. "Just wait and see."

"Sure," Joey says, his lips pulled tight.

I laugh; he stares at the dirt floor and kicks at a screwdriver, the one with the broken handle. I feel good. I step over to the bench and grab the motor's rope starter and brace my right leg against the bottom of the bench.

"Ready?"

"For what?" Joey says, staring up at me.

I yank the cord hard and the engine backfires once, Bang, spits flame out the exhaust pipe, and clatters into a steady roar. Deafening. In the soft light of her parents' basement, on that old mohair couch, she pulled me to her lips, wet. Her hips rose, fell and rose again, her breath hot on my neck. "You're the only one, John Avery."

Joey's teeth are like shells, big white shells.

"Here!" I yell over the din, "try this!"

I take Joey's right hand, put his index finger on the throttle and push down. The engine roars, louder, softer, falls and rises, falls and rises, blows black exhaust, smelling of burned oil, into the garage. I flip on the choke and the motor coughs twice and stops. My ears ring and Joey dances, spins on his toes. My stomach burns. I imagine him meeting her in that basement, the mohair couch, her breasts....

"Wait'll they see this," Joey says.

He wants to know when I'll finish the rest of the bike. I tell him I don't know.

Back on the porch, I smell dinner through the window that opens into the living room. Thyme, oregano, garlic. Rosemary. My dinner still simmering on the stove. Low heat. Her sex beneath my hand, her arching back and smooth, downy stomach; and spring, the lilacs I picked for her, purple, the diamond she gave me, hidden in a box of Guatemalan worry people no bigger than thumb tacks. We named them--Bif, Lazarus, and Eunice--sitting together on her bed. She touched her warm lips to my ear, "Don't ever leave me, John Avery."

"Gee, that smells great," Joey says.

"You think so?" I drop into my deck chair again and prop my feet up beside the melon rind on the railing.

"Yeah. Smells like spaghetti." Joey sniffs and smiles.

"I got enough for both of us."

His pudgy face lights up, all cheeks and teeth. "Really?"

"Sure. Go ask your mom if it's okay."

Joey sprints home across his folks' lawn. The goddamned flies are still crawling on the rind, all that remains of the melon. Got it fresh off the vine. She helped me the day I planted them. Next it's maggots. Everything dies.

Joey's taking his time, but then I hear a screen door slam and he's jogging across the lawn, his feet jutting out at odd angles, awkward, a big smile on his face. I want to tell him everything is okay, that someday a girl like Rachael will want him, will love him.

He stomps up the porch steps, wheezing from the short run.

"My mom told me... I can eat here... tonight," he says.

He stands in front of me, eyes darting from side to side, hiding something behind his back. He's wearing a white t-shirt now, and I wonder if his mother gave him hell about the grease smudges on the other.

"Close your eyes," he says.

I do. I can smell soap on Joey's hands, Irish Spring.

"Put out your hands."

"Is it alive?"

"No."

Something rustles.

I put out my hands and he drops what feels like a magazine into them.

"Now?"

"Open your eyes!"

Joey has turned it over so the back is facing up--an ad for X-ray

glasses. Some guy with a crew cut stares at his hand. With the glasses on it's just bones.

"Turn it over," Joey says. He rocks back and forth on the balls of his feet.

MAGNUS ROBOT FIGHTER 2400

Under the title there is a hero with Superman's build, but green and scaly, like a reptile, bashing some bug-eyed robots all to bits.

"It's my favorite one," Joey says.

I like the pictures--they're all dated, done in art-deco style, streamlined with swooping curves, crimson and aquamarine. On page forty-three Magnus sweeps a green-eyed heroine from a rooftop swarming with robots. Something in my chest loosens; my face is hot. I try to give the comic back, but Joey won't take it.

In the kitchen I fix up two plates of linguini, hoping he will eat the spinach noodles. I cross the living room floor, balancing everything on a tray, careful not to trip on the rag-rug in the foyer.

Joey opens the front door for me. A breeze catches it, wresting the knob in his hand. I step over to the chairs, and Joey throws himself down into the one nearest the railing. I hand him his plate and silverware and he smells the linguini, pokes at the green noodles with his fork and takes a small bite. He swallows, slowly, and smiles.

"Jees, this is great," he says.

Inside the phone rings. Five, six, ten rings.

"Aren't you gonna answer your phone?" Joey asks, stuffing more linguini into his mouth with his fork.

My boots thud on the porch floor. I slam the front door behind me and cross the living room to the kitchen where the phone rings. Answer. Answer.

I pick up the phone.

"Hello."

"Hello, John. Say, I know I'm...."

I glance up at the wall clock. It's nearly twenty after seven. I butt my head up against the cupboard over the sink. Water drips from the faucet into the chrome-ringed drain, plip, plip, plip.

"Are you listening?"

"Sure...."

"Is something wrong?"

I hold the receiver away from my mouth and stare into the sink, stark white. When I think of him inside her I ache.

"Are you there?"

"Yeah."

"You got my letter."

"Uh huh."

I rip the letter from my shirt-pocket, crush it into a ball, and drop it into the sink. Under the faucet it opens like a flower, the jet ink bleeding through the wet paper.

"I can't stay on the phone. He's waiting...."

Overhead the fluorescent light buzzes, glows bluish-white.

"Rosemary, I can't take this shit anymore."

I ram the receiver into its cradle. My brain feels like it's

swelling, frying, and my eyes bulge under the blue light. My ears hum, crackle with electricity. The phone starts to ring again and I grab the cord and jerk the plug out of the wall. Jesus Fucking Christ! I slam the phone against the refrigerator. The bell dings, tinny, and the mouthpiece snaps off and rattles across the floor.

"You okay in there, Mr. Avery?" Joey yells through the window.

I shove my hands into my pockets and clear my throat.

"Be out in a second."

I pick up the receiver. I could plug the phone back in.... I can hear Joey reading from the Magnus Robot Fighter comic book, his voice, like Rosemary's, near-deep, almost throaty. "I love you, John Avery. Touch me...."

My legs shake as I walk through the living room to the porch, trying to hold it in, bury it. Joey has been waiting for me. He sets the comic book down and rests his hands on his knees. I reach under my chair for my plate, set it on my lap and start eating. The French bread is so dry I can't swallow it.

"Who was that on the phone?"

I can tell he's watching me, wondering why I'm laughing, wiping at my eyes with the napkin. But Joey, he clears his throat.

"It's okay, Mr. Avery," he says, "It's okay."

A BLESSING

On the way out to Dickinson, North Dakota, we talked about my uncle Dean's gun collection, and how his Colt forty-five could have gone off while he was cleaning it. Accidents do happen.

My mother nodded off to sleep, her head propped against the passenger door window with Prince, our pomeranian, nestled in her lap, and my dad ran the Jag up over a hundred. The red mile markers on the shoulders flashed by like tiny comets, and I sat on my hands, hoping my dad didn't fall asleep at the wheel. He puffed on a cigarette, his head slowly dropping toward his chest, unaware of the ashes that tumbled down his suit jacket.

I watched Dean do that once, forget he was smoking and drop a caterpillar sized ash in his lap.

Dean was always doing weird things: pouring pop into glasses until the pop spilled all over; or talking to you, in the middle of a conversation, he'd just stare off with his eyes zigging back and forth.

Once, when I was really little, I asked my dad what was wrong with Dean, and my dad said that Dean was probably just tired. I thought maybe he was crazy, until I found this Minnesota Daily folded up in my dad's Gopher yearbook. On the front page, under all the stuff about Germany surrendering, there was an article titled: "No String Around This Man's Finger." The article went on about Dean's photographic memory, how if he read something once, and you asked him to read back a paragraph, or a whole page, he could just stare into space and ramble off what you wanted him to.

They put his picture under the last column where it talked about his scholarship to Harvard: he had a smile that bent down in the corners, and eyes with pupils so huge they looked like they'd swallow things.

I couldn't have been more than eight or nine when I found the article. By then Dean had already moved out to Los Angeles with his wife, Mick, to be a big-time lawyer for the movie stars. He was so busy suing everybody that we didn't see him for years, not even on holidays, though I heard things about him, off and on, how he'd won some tough cases, and how my dad was worried about his drinking.

On my tenth birthday, after we'd finished dinner and I'd blown the candles out on my cake, the doorbell rang. I sat there with my mother's present in my lap wondering if I should open it first or what.

"Go see who it is," she said. She winked at my dad. "Go on...."

I ran to the front door and opened it, and Dean stood there with that funny smile on his face, like he had an ice cube in his throat and was trying not to swallow it.

"How you doin', Sport!" he said.

I stepped back because I thought he'd rub his knuckles over my head like he used to.

"Hi Dean."

His mouth arched like a bow, only upside down, like I'd kicked him or something. He reached into his knee-length coat, above the belt where it bulged, and held out a black-nosed puppy, a pomeranian.

"Happy Birthday!"

Dean was like that. Always surprises. The next time we heard from him he was messed up in a law suit over an actor who'd been accused of being a communist. Nobody had wanted the case and Dean, who liked "challenges," as he called them, dove right in. After it was over he bought a house in Dickinson, North Dakota.

Jesus, what a move.

That's when I got to know my cousins Odie and Diana--they came with Dean and Mick for Thanksgiving Day Weekend. My mother put us at the end of the table, Odie to my left and Diana straight across. While Dean told everybody at the other end about the communist deal, Odie made a mountain with his mashed potatoes and poured gravy over it so his peas floated in a brown sea. He was just a couple years older than I was--fifteen, a year older than Diana--and I thought he was acting pretty strange.

Diana seemed to think so too. She sat with her eyes fixed on her plate. Every so often she'd toss her ponytail over her shoulder and raise her head, enough to see me staring, and I'd make a big deal out of cutting my roast beef until I dared to look some more. I thought the kids probably teased her about her mouth, the way it was crooked, just a little to one side, and her lips were wider than usual, especially the top one.

Odie nudged me with his elbow, squashed a gravy-coated pea on his fork, bent the fork back like a catapult, and flicked the pea right onto Diana's blouse. It stuck there like a nipple, poking through the brown gravy beneath it. Diana smiled at me, her teeth chalk-white under her

crooked lips, and leaned into the table.

"I'm gonna get you, you bastard," she said to Odie.

And she usually did get him; I'd hear it from Odie when we snuck off into the woods behind our house to smoke Marlboros. He got to telling me all kinds of things back there, like what he'd read in sex books--things about cucumbers and other sick stuff. After those first few months, they didn't visit anymore, and nobody said why, but I knew it had to do with Dean's "problem."

The year after, a few days before Christmas, Odie called from a drugstore across town.

"Your folks around?" he said. He'd gotten his drivers license and was on a "road-trip." Anywhere. Just away from Dickinson, he said. He picked me up in his Lemans, and we drove to the ice rink down the block. At the rental window a man wearing a greasy apron tried to overcharge us. Odie gave the guy a dirty look and recited some baloney about criminal fraud, case statutes and all, and the guy stood there with his mouth open.

I felt like we got ripped off anyway because the guy gave me a pair of skates that pinched my feet real bad--on the ice I scuttled with them more than skated, while Odie went forwards and backwards, smiling like those figure skaters you see in the Olympics.

From the benches above the rink, a pack of girls waved to Odie. He slid sideways, skates scraping, and fell on his butt, the showoff, and the girls laughed at him. They pushed the one on the end, a blond with big boobs, off her seat and she ran to the dividing wall and hung her

arms over it. Odie skated to the wall and kissed her right in front of her friends. Just like nothing.

Out front of the rental window, taking off my skates, I asked Odie, "How come that girl kissed ya?"

"No reason." He smiled again, that figure skater's smile, boyish; it made you want to like him even though you could tell he was full of it. "It's the secret everybody knows," he said, slapping me on the back. He pulled off his skates and gave me a sideways glance.

"You mind if I don't drop you off at your place?"

I said that was okay and we walked out to the parking lot. He stepped into his car and said through the open door, "Give your parents my regards, will ya?"

"Sure will," I said.

"I wanna hear more good things about you, Mr. Science."

I said, "Do you have to be such a bastard, Odie," and slammed his door. Then he spun out onto Eleventh Avenue and waved.

I hated that "Mr. Science" stuff, especially coming from Odie. Everyone had been calling me that since I'd won the Science prize at the state fair with my dinosaur booth. What a joke. I figured the judges just felt sorry for me, gave me that prize because I made my models out of clay, and when I put them out in the sun for display, they melted.

What I really wanted was Dean's gift. I knew Odie had it--he was always rambling off things he'd read somewhere, like he did to the guy at the rink--and I thought any day it would come to me, too. So in the meantime I faked knowing things I didn't know, mostly science stuff, and

some kids were impressed with it, my lies. But it always came back to me.

Like the time I decided I'd do perfect in school to prove to myself that I had Dean's gift. All winter I studied, even the things I hated. I don't think I'd ever wanted anything so bad, to see in print that I was special.

The last day of school, I walked home with my semester card in my pocket, unopened. In my bedroom I held the envelope under my nightstand lamp. I had this feeling like I was in a summer matinee about to end, where you step out of the cool theater into the parking lot, and everything is distorted. Upstairs, my mother was frying hamburger; it sizzled in the pan. I opened the envelope, finally, and what I saw only made certain what I'd always known.

When my father came home from work he banged on my door until I unlocked it. He sat beside me on the bed, piecing together my grade card on the quilt.

"These are really good, Danny," he said.

I just wanted to melt into the floor.

"Look at this," he said. "You got an A in science."

For a while after that I felt weird around Odie, wishing I was like him and hating him at the same time. It seemed he could do anything he wanted, just as easy as he pleased. It was all a big joke to Odie, like the time he got caught with a few ounces of pot on him. Dean had to work like hell to keep Odie out of jail, because Odie'd slugged an officer in the eye when he was arrested.

Odie was like that with Diana, too--always testing her. If she came with him he wouldn't leave her alone. She never said much. Just watched, tugging on her pony-tail, her crooked mouth set as though she were keeping some secret to herself. He played some mean tricks on her, like the time he put honey in her shampoo and her hair dried stiff as cardboard. She got back at him by shoving apples up the exhaust pipe of his Lemans.

He drove that car all over the place, and got a DWI around the time he turned eighteen. The week after we heard about it: he came all the way from "No-Dak" without a license, and stayed one day. That was in January. It had just snowed, and the plows were out. We drove downtown to see "Dirty Harry" at the Orpheum theater, and on the way there Odie stopped by a liquor store and got some Pabst Blue Ribbon. He weaved between lanes, a can of beer in his hand, laughing and fishtailing on the ice. I gripped the dashboard, waiting for the rending of glass and metal.

When we finally rolled by the Orpheum's flashing yellow marquee into the parking lot, I wanted out. Odie pointed us into a narrow space between a van and a Cadillac, and nicked the Caddie trying to get in. Then he backed all the way around the lot with his head out the window and skidded to a stop, straddling two spaces.

I was halfway around the side of the building when he yelled, "Hey! Where ya goin'?" He stood by the exit door in a pile of snow. "Come on!" he said.

A fat guy stepped out of the theater and Odie got a hold of the door.

Inside we ducked behind the velvet curtains over the exit. The usher strode by, headed toward the concession stand, and we half-crawled, half-ran to the empty seats in the front row.

The place was packed, a hundred faces lifted up like pale moons. On the screen, looming over my head, this guy peeked through a telescope into an apartment window. Odie jabbed me in the side when a nurse undressed in one of the windows, slow, her breasts like the ones in Playboy. She looked up through the telescope, as if into my eyes. I'd never seen an R-rated film before, and I wondered if I would turn into a pervert, peeking into windows like this guy.

"That's why they call him Dirty Harry," Odie said with a smirk on his face.

Then Harry was chasing that psycho up to a huge tower, that one in San Francisco that looks like a fire-hose nozzle, a real good part, when Odie says, "Come on, I got to go to the can."

I wondered why the hell he couldn't wait, but I got up to go with him anyway, walking backwards, watching the film until I tripped and fell onto some woman's lap. Odie held the curtains to the concession open. He laughed, framed there between the curtains, doubled over.

In the can the fluorescent lights were blinding. I bellied up to a urinal and made an effort to pee. Odie stepped up to the one next to mine and unbuckled his pants, and dropped them low on his hips. I'd never seen anyone in the city pee like that. In the city everyone made an effort to kind of hide it. Not Odie, he just let it hang out, fleshy, like some over-ripe garden fruit.

I wagged mine a few times, gave up on the effort to pee, and zipped up.

Odie was gushing like a hydrant. He'd only let me drink one can of beer and he'd downed the other five. He squinted over at me and bent his hips into the urinal.

"These things are good for more than peeing, you know."

"I don't want to miss too much of the film, Odie."

"No, really," he said, batting off the last few drops. "Got me a french tickler here, girlie."

Then Odie started singing, and I was real embarrassed, hoping nobody would come in. His voice was boozy, and flat:

"One two three, what are we fightin' for?"

He cocked his eyebrows up, hummed a few bars, then sang again, his voice nearly a whisper,

"Five six seven, open up them pearly gates,

Well, there ain't no reason to wonder why!

Cause, Whoopee! We're all gonna die."

He turned from the urinal and zipped up his pants. "Ya gonna miss me, Danny?" he said, his eyes suddenly sad and dark.

II

That week Odie took the train down to Dupre, Texas, for basic training--Dean, Diana, and Mick saw him off at the station--and waiting at the house when they got back was Dwight, Diana's boyfriend, a U-haul trailer hitched to the back of his car. Dean called every night that

week, sometimes as late as two or three in the morning, frantic over Diana's moving out with the "bearded wonder;" we didn't hear from him until Diana and Dwight broke up the first week of June.

I'd just taken my motorcycle endorsement test, and had bought a friend's Triumph, a Bonneville six-fifty. Friday of that week my folks went to a surgery staff dinner, the kind my dad hated so much, and I had the Triumph's carburetors all over the kitchen table: jet needles, gaskets, floats.

The windows rattled, and Diana bounced up the driveway in Odie's Lemans and lurched to a stop. She waved to me from behind the wheel and opened her door. A beer bottle fell onto the driveway with a hollow, glassy clank!

"Hey, Danny!" she said, stumbling out of the car. With her arms outstretched, she ran circles around me and stopped--kissing me right on the mouth. She tasted like cherries and talcum powder.

"I'm a graduate!"

In the kitchen Diana spouted off about Sister Agnes and Sister Eunice at Holy Angels High School while I made coffee. I handed Diana her cup and pulled back a chair at the table. She took a sip, shuddered, and with that usual flick of her head, sent her ponytail over her shoulder.

"You wanna hear a secret?" she said, leaning across the table toward me, her eyes wet and slap-happy. "Dwight and I took some acid and went to mass one night and did it in the loft." She giggled and set her cup down so she could talk with her hands. "It was great. Sister Agnes was

playing the organ, 'dum, dum, dah-dum,' you know." She made little swinging motions with her hands, like a band director. "Everyone was out there singing away. I could just see that prude, Sister Eunice, counting her rosary." She laughed, so hard that her eyes filmed over. She stared out the window, her jaw tight so the muscles stood out on the sides. "That bastard!" She played with the rubber band on the end of her pony tail, twisting it around her fingers.

"Did you hear how he's going with that friend of mine? Good ol' Patty."

"No."

"Well he is, that asshole."

She set her purse on the table and shuffled through it for her cigarettes and lighter. She ripped the cellophane off a pack of Kools and snapped it against her palm. "He can stay gone. I've forgotten that fucker already." She pulled on her ponytail again, "You hear about Odie?"

"No. What about him?"

She flicked a cigarette out of the package at me. I poked the butt in the corner of my mouth and stood, leaned over to the east window, and pried it open; the window's wooden frame screeched on its aluminum runners. A gust of warm air, thick with the smell of grass, rushed across the table, ruffling the corner of a napkin I had some carburetor parts wrapped in.

"What about Odie?"

"He's AWOL."

She flicked the long grey ash at the end of her cigarette into her coffee cup, her hand shaking. "You know, before this whole thing, Odie was ready to take a hike up north." She raised her eyes, slow, and pursed her mouth. "If you ask me he should've. But Dad, he tells Odie he'd fuck up any career he could ever have, says the bar would never have him."

"So what did Odie say?"

"You know old bigmouth, he says, 'What career? I'm not goin' through any more school bullshit.' I don't think I've ever seen Dad so pissed." She blew a smoke-ring. It hung over the table, wavering, open like a mouth. "Then Odie goes off about how Dad hid in school during the last war and Dad smacked him one, right here." She touched the corner of her mouth, that sad, crooked mouth. "Mom won't talk to him."

"Jesus...."

"Yeah, that's what I think."

Even after Diana got sick in the kitchen, I couldn't stop thinking about her, how I wanted to hold her while she cried. But there was that other thing, too, and I felt terrible about it--how I undressed her in my mind. I could still taste her lips, that cherry gloss, and smell her perfume, sweet, dusty, like baby powder. So what if she was my cousin?

Around December they found Odie in Saigon. He'd been shot up so bad they had to use dental records to identify his body. They buried him at the V.A. cemetery in St. Paul, just about five miles from our house. After the services were over we had these silent dinners, my dad clearing his throat every twenty seconds, Dean and Mick sitting there,

trying to eat what my mom put out for them, Diana staring across the table at Dean. She didn't even say good-bye when they left. Mick got out the door and Dean hugged my dad, real hard, and my dad said, "Call, anytime you want. If it gets bad, call. All right?"

That night I couldn't sleep. I pictured the palms and cluttered streets in Saigon, the dark doorways with Vietnamese in them wearing straw hats, how the bullets ripped through Odie, his surprised face, that boyish grin of his no use at all.

I got up to take a leak and heard Diana crying. She sat at the kitchen table, biting the knuckles on her right hand. A spear of light cut across her face from the street lamps.

"Danny, is that you?" she said.

I stood in the kitchen doorway.

"Your folks got anything to drink around here?" She coughed, something rattled in her chest, hollow, and she pulled at the draw string around the neck of her gray flannel nightshirt.

I dragged a chair to the cupboard over the stove and stood on it, peering into the recess where my dad hid the booze his patients gave him for Christmas. I'd heard vodka didn't smell, so I slid out the big bottle of Smirnoffs, careful not to bang it on the cupboard sill.

In Diana's room the street lights glowed through the yellow curtains my mom was always talking about throwing away. I sat in my dad's wing-chair and watched her pour the drinks. She handed me a cup and sat on the bed, her legs pulled up beside her. I took a swig of the Coke and vodka and it warmed my stomach and made me woozy.

Diana's teeth chattered against the rim of her cup as she held it to her mouth and tilted back her head. She filled our glasses again, and we sipped at them in the half-dark until she gasped for breath, screeched like air let out of a balloon.

I thumped her on the back and she twisted under my hands and wrapped her arms around me, crying again. Diana got her breath and I leaned back, thinking I'd sit in the chair and wrap a blanket around myself.

"Stay."

"Diana--"

"Just be here, okay?"

An ice-cold draft was rolling off the window. Diana draped the quilt at the foot of the bed over us and I lay on my back, Diana curled up beside. Her nipples poked into my chest through her nightshirt, its oversize buttons digging into my ribs. I tried to pull her shirt back so the buttons were out of the way....

My mother made pancakes for us in the morning. That bright, bright morning. We didn't say a word to each other at the table, though Diana said plenty to my dad--all that kind of crap about the weather and cars. I just wanted to get away.

Diana did. She took the bus back to Dickinson. A few weeks later we heard she had a new "flame," some guy she met at a Safeway store. He invited her to these "soul talks," and pretty soon, from what Dean and Mick told my mother, Diana really got weird, reading them things out of the Bible and asking them if they were "saved." I heard my dad talking on the phone to Dean about how "the monk's" church might be a cult.

Not too long after that they got married. I was glad I missed their wedding; they had it before summer vacation and I couldn't skip my tests. My folks didn't say anything about it when they got home, only that Diana had rushed things.

She visited us in July, her stomach as big as a beach ball. We went out to Bridgeman's Ice Cream Parlor to talk, just Diana and me. The air-conditioning had failed and people were packed at the tables, sweating so their shirts had dark triangles between the shoulders. I told a waitress we needed a table for three and she smiled; it didn't occur to me until we sat down that the waitress thought I was making a "baby-on-the-way" joke. I'd just done it out of habit, like Odie was still with us.

In a booth behind us a fat man wearing a yellow golf shirt spooned whipped cream off his fudge sundae.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" Diana said.

The fat man turned from his sundae, a cherry stem in his mouth, and hard-eyed, I watched him until he picked up his spoon.

"No," I said, "I don't think you're crazy."

Diana lay her hands over her stomach, high and round like the knoll of a hill. She followed a waitress with her eyes, sweeping around slowly. "I couldn't believe it at first. You know, I hadn't seen anyone since Dwight.... I kept thinking, any day now I'll have my period." She ripped her napkin into strips and arranged them in neat rows on the table. "I think Art'll be a good father."

For a moment there, in the terrible heat, I got a chill through my

back, a cold stabbing between my shoulders.

"What do you mean, you hadn't seen anyone since Dwight?"

Our waitress, balancing tall soda glasses and ice-cream boats on a tray, squeezed between Diana's chair and the fat man's booth. She flashed us a Pepsodent smile, set our root beer floats in front of us, slapped down the check--Thanks! Marcy--and whisked off to a booth by the cash register.

"Danny, do you remember when you told me how you felt about Dean?"

"Yeah, I do."

"And I said, 'You really don't want what Dean has,' and you got so damn mad, yelled 'how would you know,' and I tried to tell you how awful it was, and you just got madder and madder, talked about how easy everything would be...."

She stirred the blob of ice cream in her root beer, clinking her spoon against the sides of the glass.

"Maybe all this is a kind of blessing for you."

"A blessing? What are you talking about?"

"You're lucky, Danny," she said.

"Lucky?"

She tore another strip off her napkin. "Yeah. A few years from now--"

"Diana, I don't want to hear it."

"Okay, Danny," she said. "But sometime you just listen, all right?"

After the baby was born she and Arthur divorced. He accused her of infidelity and alcoholism. Diana had been boozing it up pretty bad from

what I'd heard, enough so she had to go to AA.

And Dean, he seemed to take it all in stride. At family get-togethers he joked around and smiled a lot. His eyes had gotten even darker, like they were swallowing themselves. Sometimes Dean and Mick brought the baby, though Diana didn't come with them anymore. Dean held the baby up one night, right beside me, and said, "Boy, if that isn't a resemblance--the little guy looks like Danny." I broke out in a cold sweat and Dean asked me if I was sick. I said I was.

Sometimes after Dean and Mick left I'd lie awake wondering if they knew about the baby--Dean had gotten such a strange expression on his face, looking at Toby and me side by side.

I thought about how I'd abandoned Diana and the baby, too. And how I should've stopped it that night. But she kissed me, her lips soft, gliding over mine, and pulled back her shirt where I'd tugged at it. And at that Bridgemans, the sweat running down my back, I wanted to tell her how I felt, but I was too weak, too afraid, too something. I wasn't supposed to feel that way about her, couldn't. What would they say? It was an accident?

That's what my dad said about Dean. We were in the middle of dinner, and the phone rang. He reached around behind him and picked up the receiver. He said, "Hi, Mick," and then his face sagged. "Dean's had an accident," he said.

By nine the following morning we were on Interstate 94, headed west out of St. Paul. After my mother nodded off and my dad ran the Jag up over a hundred, I watched the road, thinking about Dean and Odie and

Diana. Eight years, and all I had of it were these glimpses, like pieces of dreams, as if none of it had really happened at all: that pea sticking onto Diana's dress, and the way she smiled at me and told Odie she was gonna get him. Dean with the puppy....

Outside Bismarck my dad backed down to ninety. He hunched over the steering wheel, his mouth pursed, as though he had something bitter in his mouth.

I tapped him on the shoulder. "Want me to drive?"

"No," he said. "Not right now."

"Sure?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

I braced myself between the front seats. "Hey, dad."

He glanced up into the rear-view mirror, bug-eyed with his Ray Ban's on. "Hey, what?"

"I was just thinking about Dean."

He pried the sunglasses from his face and set them on the dashboard. We swung wide around a Trailways bus loaded with kids peering out its smoke-tinted windows. Ahead, the road narrowed to a fine grey point on a brown hillside, not a car on it.

"Did Dean say anything to you?"

My dad's shoulders sagged, as though a blast of hot air had hit him and he was melting. He cleared his throat, then spun around in his seat and grasped my knee, his fingers shaking and eyes welled up; his irises were that brittle blue, like Dean's.

"You know the way Dean used to smile a lot. A real clown, right?"

Loads of laughs." My dad ran his hand across his nose. "He called last week, said to me, 'Jack, I'm scared. I can't lose this thing with Odie.' Hadn't slept in a month. Nothing new. I told him I'd come out...." He slammed his fist into the dashboard, "Damn him!"

Prince jumped up in my mother's lap, barking and snarling. She leaned away from the door, her newly permed hair crushed on the window side, her eyes sleepy and confused.

My dad's lips twisted up bad, and he said, "It killed him, Danny. All those years.... Is that what you want, Danny?" he said, his voice choked with rage.

My mother jerked on his arm, "Leave him alone, Jack!"

And while they fought, my father pounding on the dashboard and my mother gripping the handle on the glove compartment, I stared out the window at the prairie rushing by, the high red bluffs and blue-green plains, and listened to Diana. Snap shots. That's all this day would be. Like the other bad days: when Mick called about Dean and when I came home with my grades. Faded pictures I could stuff away. And the good ones, they were there too: Odie on the ice, the girls, smoking cigarettes behind the house. The snapshots were all a little dusty, but for the first time, I could see them well enough if I wanted to.

SOMEWHERE, IN WISCONSIN

Pumpkinseed sunfish nibble on Zackary Bowman's toes. Zack reaches into his shirt pocket, breaks two Oreos apart, and tosses a handful of bits out from the dock. Where the bits fall, sunfish swirl in a frenzy of snapping mouths and flashing orange bellies. Further out, a red sailboat tacks to the lee side of the lake, tilted at a crazy angle.

Bob Hanson's thin, nasal voice stretches across the water.

"Goddammit, Stan! You're gonna capsize--"

Then the bow goes under and Bob yells, "I'm wet now!"

Stan laughs, turning the rudder to the side again so more water comes over the bow.

The fish are nibbling again and Zack jerks his legs from the water. He sprawls across the dock, his chin propped up on the last rough-hewn two-by-six, and tosses out another handful of Oreo bits.

A lone sunfish moves slow and sick on the edge of the circle, white fungus growing on his side in the shape of a hand. Zack's hand. Zack knew not to take him off the hook without wetting his hand in the lake. That was something he learned the first year up to Flaming Pine. "You wipe off the mucus with a dry hand and fungus will grow," Bill the scoutmaster, had said when they were out fishing. "No use throwin' 'em back in if you've handled 'em dry, cause they're as good as dead."

That Monday two weeks ago was a scorcher, in the nineties and humid, and coming up in the car, Bob had whined continually from the back seat about why Zack got to drive. Bob said the Studebaker was his dad's car,

so he should get to drive. Bill told him to shut up. When they finally got to camp Zack felt like killing something. He went down to the lake with his gear, cast out from the dock, and the first fish he caught he ripped off his line, squeezing it hard behind the gills so the mucus jelled up between his dry fingers.

For the past two weeks Zack has watched the fungus grow. It's gotten much worse, and Zack is sure the fish will die before he leaves tomorrow. The fungus reminds Zack of the way his father died last fall, the big lump on his neck getting bigger and bigger until his whole face was purple and swollen.

The pumpkinseed slowly waves its dorsal and ventral fins, hungry but too weak to fight for the bits. Zack tosses out a big piece, and just when the pumpkinseed is ready to suck it in, one of the smaller sunfish shoots out from the school and snatches the piece from above. Zack tosses a handful of the Oreos bits into the bull reeds rising off to the south side of the dock and the school is gone but for the lone fish slowly fanning itself on the bottom.

Zack stretches his hand out over the end of the dock. The pumpkinseed wobbles to the surface and hovers there, just below the glassy surface; the fish balances to one side, rolling his eye up to watch for the Oreos bits. The eye shines bronze-gold inside, as though it were packed with copper dust.

The pumpkinseed jets forward to swallow the bit Zack drops, rotating its eye up again, waiting. Then the others are back, tails thrashing and mouths gaping. A big one, nearly black but for its orange belly,

gobbles up two bits. The pumpkinseed swims out from the dock, a yard or so away from the school.

Zack smells cigar smoke. Behind him Bill stands at the top of the bank, smoking a Swisher Sweet. He wears green tinted safety glasses, the kind with the side curtains, and heavy brown boots.

"Zack," he calls, "Are they capsizing that sailboat again?"

"Sort of," Zack yells over his shoulder, hoping Bill doesn't come down to talk. Zack doesn't want Bill to see the fish.

"You'd better call them in, don't you think?" Bill says, with a restrained sharpness in his voice.

Bill tries not to watch out for Bob too much, tries to treat him like one of the scouts, and Bob takes it wrong, especially when Bill's got to play father to the homesick kids that cry in their tents at night. Bob gets crabby then, and Bill takes him aside for a talk, something he rarely does with the others.

"We've gotta get dinner on the way. Give 'em a ring, will you? I've already got the hooch on the table."

Zack rubs the Oreo dust from his palms and tosses the last big piece to the pumpkinseed. The fish tilts its coppery eye up as if to nod, swallows the piece, and swims with the others into the thick, green rushes.

Hooch. It's kool-aid, for Christ's sake. Zack stands and yells across the lake until his throat aches. He slides the red and white flags out from the dock's support pipes and crosses them over his head.

Stan waves from the tiller.

Beyond the sailboat Zack can just make out a tiny yellow building on the other side of Lake Icaguan; he remembers his first mile swim, breast stroking it half way across--the way he bragged he would--the slippery weeds trailing from his legs. Then turning in front of the Sportsman's bar and half drowning, sidestroking it all the way back to the dock with Bob cheering him on from the rowboat. Bob has terrible asthma and never could make it across and back.

Zack climbs the path up to camp. The path is deeply rutted and rocky. Five years ago, when they cut the path into the bank on a hot August day, Zack swung the heavy pick axe until his arms were so weak he couldn't lift it to knock apart the big yellow chunks of sandstone that were in the way. Then Stan took his turn, and Bob, even Bob gave it a whack, wheezing each time he raised the pick axe over his head. When Bob was done wheezing he told jokes he'd gotten out of Mad Magazine, swinging his hands and making faces. They'd all laughed so hard.

Bill was in the water with Zack's dad, a white t-shirt wrapped like a turban over his bald spot. While Bill and Zack's dad pounded the posts into the hard rock and sand with that fifteen pound sledgehammer, they talked about Bobby Kennedy. Zack had never heard Bill or his dad so angry. Then they shook hands, and Bill said, "You're a good man, Frank."

"You too, Bill," Zack's dad said.

That was one of the best days.

Zack climbs the last steep section, where railroad ties are sunk

deep into the hillside, and stops to kick the one he put in himself. The oily, blue-black creosote still stinks, resinous. Bill got the ties from Burlington Northern. He worked for them then and they gave him the ties, free. Other steps are birch trunks from the trees they cut down to make the path. Zack can still hear the roar of his dad's chainsaw, see his arms, so thick and strong, running that glittering blade into the trunks, the wood chips spitting out in a thick whitish-yellow stream. And the stink of it! Sap and sour bark and gasoline. And now the trees that were so small have soared up, branching out until the path has a solid canopy of shiny poplar and birch leaves above it.

Zack clears the last rise on the path. Under the dining fly Bill straddles a wooden mess cabinet the size of a small dresser, checking off the pots, pans, "hooch jars," and cutlery in front of him. He puffs on his cigar and turns a bent spatula in his hands. Zack strides across the field, his bare toes rip-rip-ripping at the brown, sunburned grass.

Bill looks up from the list he has on the clipboard. "They're on their way?"

"Ya," Zack says, walking to the end of the fly. There, a dutch oven, glowing coals heaped over it, sits atop more coals. The smell is ashy, dry, and from inside comes a muffled bubbling. Zack lifts the lid of the dutch oven with a pliers and steam rolls up and around it. Big chunks of beef, potatoes, and carrots simmer in Bill's homemade sauce. The coals

on the lid burn Zack's knuckles and he drops it back down with a metallic clank.

"As soon as I've got this checked off I'll have you go over it again," Bill says.

"Okay," Zack says. He sidesteps the ropes holding down the fly. "I'm gonna go up and check the tent area, all right?"

Zack hikes across the wide, yellow field where the tents stood yesterday, picking up candy bar wrappers. In the morning Ollie, the thin faced man from the DNR, will drive up from Dresser in his forest-service-green truck to inspect the camp. Only this time Bill will give Ollie a cigar and a cup of coffee, and Bill and Ollie will make a big circle around the dining and tenting areas. Like Zack's dad did for years, Bill will talk about the weather and how's the fishing, trying to keep him away from the bank.

One year Ollie threatened not to renew the camp permit when he saw all the gulleys carved into the bank where the kids had taken shortcuts to the lake. Zack's dad had talked to Ollie for an hour about how important the camp was. "Steps is what you need," Ollie said.

That week they built the path, and since then, every year Ollie had checked the path and the bank, watching the ruts get deeper and rockier until tree roots surfaced in spots.

"This might be the year," Ollie would say.

Bill couldn't do anything with him, but Zack's dad, he had a way with people, and Ollie and he struck up a silent friendship, an understanding. Zack's dad would nod soberly, and Ollie, with one foot

in his truck, would say, "I'll see what I can do." Then Ollie would get back in the truck and wave good-bye. They all knew Ollie would catch hell some day when another man was sent out.

Stan and Bob walk up the path to the dining fly, safety-orange life preservers slung over their shoulders.

"Hey, Zack! Dinner's on," Bill yells.

At the table, the stew steaming on his plate, Zack stares across at Bob. Bob screws his eyes around, any which way so he doesn't have to look at Zack. Bill crunches into the wedge of lettuce he has heaped with roquefort dressing and croutons. Stan thumps on the bottom of the dressing bottle to get the last of it out.

"How was it out on the lake?" Bill says.

"Pretty nice," Stan says. He pokes Bob beside him. "What do think, Bobber?"

"S' Okay," Bob says, raising a forkfull of the hot stew to his mouth. He takes a big bite and winces, and waves his hand in front of his mouth. His mouth is pinched, and his jaw muscles are square under his cheeks.

The night-before-last, Bill had the Senior Patrol Leader election, and Zack won it. Stan gave Zack the blue pin to tack over the left pocket of his shirt, and Bob cried behind his tent. When Zack tried to talk to Bob, he just blurted out, "Go away! I don't wanna talk to you."

Bob shifts a big piece of beef in his mouth. Budd Bonn, the troop's first scoutmaster, would have made him spit that one out and cut it in half. Back then Zack and Bob built a Heath Kit short-wave

radio. They rode their bikes halfway across Minneapolis to tune in on clear spring nights when the ionosphere was "popping." First they had the radio at Zack's house, and then they had it at Bob's. Then Bob figured out how to build his own transmitter and learned morse code.

When it got hot early in June, Bob's mother made fresh lemonade. She ground ice into it so the pitcher with the sunflowers got all frosty and fat beads dripped down the side, and while they played with the transmitter they drank the lemonade out of matching Flintstones glasses. It was like magic, the way Bob turned all those funny beeps into words, scribbling them down as fast as he could go. One time they got ahold of someone in Alaska, and Bob asked Zack what he wanted to say. "What is it like there?" Zack said, and Bob rapped the message off on the black lever. Seconds later the beeps came back and Bob laughed.

"What'd he say? What'd he say?"

"He says it's cold."

"What's funny about that?"

Bob scribbled on a sheet of paper and handed it to Zack. "Here."

On the bottom of the sheet he'd written:

"Nice weather for polar bears and penguins."

That summer Bob and Zack chased each other to the swimming pool every day, Zack on his Schwinn speedster and Bob on his Dunnett Knight, pedalling as fast as they could go up Sixty-sixth Street, bright white in the hot afternoon sun. Usually about halfway to the pool Bob's asthma would choke him, and he would drop back, his face smiling and desperate. Zack must have told Bob a hundred times he didn't mind waiting, but Bob

never did believe him. The second summer they were on the same baseball team: Jay Cline Chevrolet. Zack pitched and Bob played right field. Between games they ate frozen Snickers bars at the concession stand while experimental planes blasted by overhead, leaving con trails to the airport. Bob and Zack were sitting in a dugout when one crashed with a deep, shuddering, ground-shaking BOOM! They read about it in the paper the next morning, the VTOL that the rudder fell off of.

One time they raced home from a game and Zack let Bob pull ahead half a bike-length; just before they shot by Zack's driveway Bob's asthma choked him and he swerved into Zack; they smashed down on the pavement, sliding in a mess of wheels and bike frames.

The spokes were ripped out of Zack's front wheel and the rear fender was crumpled up on Bob's Dunnelt.

"Guess we kinda mashed up there," Bob said, grinning sheepishly. His forearm bled where the pavement had rubbed away the skin. He looked at the crumpled fender on his Dunnelt and shook his head, trying not to cry. "My dad's gonna kill me," he said.

They'd shaken hands over the damaged bicycles, and then laughing, they pushed them up the drive. Before they went inside they pressed their bleeding forearms together and said, "Blood Brothers," on the cement stoop.

Bill wipes up the last bit of sauce on his plate with a buttered piece of bread and chases it down with the grape hooch.

"You better eat your stew before it's stone cold, Zack," he says.

Zack shovels the stew into his mouth and asks to be excused. He

hikes through a narrow band of twisted oaks, and up, skidding and slipping on the stone strewn path to the knoll of Cook Hill where he sits, his elbows braced on his knees.

Across the lake Luther Park Camp is deserted. Last year, Zack, Stan, and Bob tossed some cherry-bombs into the girl's cabins late one night. Randy Johnson, the senior counsellor, caught them running back toward Flaming Pine, and Bill made them take a hike all the way around the lake, right then, in the dark with the trees looming over them. And to make sure they walked all the way, he sent Bob's older brother, Jeff, the senior patrol leader.

Jeff went about halfway around to the Sportsman's and then shot off into the woods. He made a real racket flanking them, snarling like a wild animal in the brush until he turned back to camp.

When Jeff was gone Stan got out a pack of Old Gold's and they smoked a few on the Sportsman's dock, the light falling through the open door at their backs. Inside people danced, shuffling across the hardwood floor, and somebody kept playing Johnny Cash songs: "Folsom Prison Blues," and "A Boy Named Sue." An old guy tottered up the dock with a quart of beer and they passed it around, wiping their mouths with their shirtsleeves like the men did inside.

A woman wearing a gingham skirt and white blouse pulled her dancing partner, a skinny guy with greased-back hair, behind a big aquamarine, bat-finned Buick Super, a convertible with the top down. He pushed her up on the hood and unbuttoned her blouse.

"We should go," Bob said. He kicked the water with his tennis shoes.

"Come on, baby," the man said. He ran his hands over the woman's breasts and down her thighs. He lifted her skirt and she wrapped her legs around him. Then the Super rocked, rocked, and rocked. Zack could hardly breathe. Stan was silent behind him, and Bob splashed his feet in the lake, faster and louder. Then she moaned some and he bucked hard, with a slick, fleshy slapping, and stopped. The woman giggled and the man looked over at Zack, Stan, and Bob on the dock and smiled, a twisted smile with bent teeth.

Zack told Stan and Bob he had to pee, and he went off into the woods, so excited that he beat off under a pine tree. On the road going home, even as late as it was, waves of heat came off the blacktop as off an oven. Zack was embarrassed--Stan wouldn't look him in the eye, and Bob talked nonstop about Sandy Koufax, so Zack figured they knew what he'd done.

Then Stan stepped over to the side of the road. "I gotta pee," he said.

"Again?" Bob asked.

Stan cleared his throat and glanced sideways over at Zack.

"I didn't go blind, did you?"

They both laughed, standing in the middle of the road.

"Jesus! Didja see her tits?" Stan said.

"Christ, I couldn't believe it...."

Bob walked up ahead, his head hanging and shoulders hunched.

"What do 'ya think, Bob?" Zack said. "For Christ's sake, you don't gotta walk up there."

Bob spun around on his heels, a sad smile on his face, his eyes glassy.

Then that bat-tailed Buick swerved around the corner, the greasy haired guy at the wheel, and he skidded to a stop.

"Hey!" he said, "You little beavers want a ride home?"

The guy popped the passenger door open. It swung, slow, like a pendulum, into the road.

"Come on.... I saw you guys down at the dock. You wanna go for a spin around the lake?"

He said his name was Jake, and tilted the pint he had to his lips, spilling some on his string tie. Close up Zack could see the individual hairs popping thick and dark out of his chin and cheeks. The amber fluid sloshed around in the bottle and he pushed it back between the front seat cushions. Stan got in the front and Bob watched from up the road, Jake's high beams shining in his eyes. He looked like a little kid in that green uniform, his purple neckerchief pointing down his narrow chest. Somehow Stan and Zack had gotten thicker, heavier, and taller, and Bob hadn't changed at all. Those lights stripped away everything, and Zack felt terrible, watching Bob stand there, blinded.

"Come on, Bob! Let's go for a ride," Zack yelled.

"Just climb over the top there," Jake said to Zack.

Jake slowed up beside Bob and stopped, and Bob kept on walking with his head down. "Last chance, buddy," Jake said. Then he slid around the first tight curve in the road. Zack looked over the fins in back and Bob stood in the middle of the road, his arms hanging at his sides,

his head cocked to the right.

"I'll bet you little beavers have never gone over a hundred!" Jake yelled into the windshield. Zack watched the trees whooshing by, blurred, and the lights came out of the dashboard, bright behind that long, long aquamarine hood. At each hill, when they shot down the backside, Zack felt his whole body rise up from the seat.

Then there was a straightaway, and Jake hit his high beams and held the wheel with both hands. "Here goes!" Jake yelled. He stomped on the gas and the engine roared and they were pushed back into the seats until the car rocked and swayed as though it were lifting off the road. It was like they were in free fall, like those pictures of John Glenn floating so slow when the newscaster said he was really going twenty-six thousand miles an hour. The trees and the road signs drifted by, the broken yellow center line under the chrome jet on the hood now a solid gold blur.

"A hundred and twenty!" Jake yelled, and Stan and Zack looked at the speedometer, a red line solid across and past the hundred and twenty mark.

Zack laughs. At the dining fly Bill is playing gin with Bob, his broad shoulders curved around his cards as he examines them. Bob raises his head, just a tiny dot from where Zack sits, and Zack waves to him. Bob lays down a card and tugs on his yellow neckerchief.

Stan told Jake where Flaming Pine camp was after he'd promised not to make any noise. When Jake slid in the drive he honked his horn and revved his engine and Bill and Zack's dad stood under the dining fly,

their hands on their hips. Jake reached around Stan, opened the door, and shoved Stan out onto the ground. "Get out of the back there, you little Peckerwood!" Zack jumped over the convertible top and Jake spun his wheels up to the road where he stopped with a squeal of rubber on blacktop. "So long, you Peckerwoods!" he yelled. He roared off leaving a cloud of exhaust and burned rubber that drifted into camp.

That week, and the next, Stan and Zack washed dishes for the whole troop, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Zack's dad showed them how to use sand in the dutch ovens to make the cleaning easier, and Bill changed the menu so they didn't use the ovens so often. The first few nights Bob tried to help Zack and Stan clean up, rolling up his shirt sleeves and dipping a few plates into the sudsy water in the wash basin. Stan told him to bug off, and Zack, bent over the table scouring a pot, felt Bob's eyes on his back.

II

Zack tosses a stone over the poplars on the bank. It splashes into the lake and Stan, down at the fly, jerks his head up from the dutch oven he is drying with a towel; he sets the oven behind the mess cabinets and climbs down the path to the dock, where he lights a cigarette, an Old Gold, probably. It's quiet with the kids gone. They packed up yesterday morning and got on the bus around noon.

Usually this last night is special. Just the two senior patrol leaders, last year's and the new one, and Bob stay to help Bill take down the dining tarp, pack up the tents and mess cabinets, and check the

grounds before Ollie stops by in the morning. The last couple years they popped popcorn, put it into grocery sacks, and drove into Danbury to see some ancient film at the Liberty Theater. Bill and Zack's dad would go too. Three years ago they'd seen "Wait Until Dark," this film about a psychopath trying to kill a blind woman, and afterwards Bob couldn't sleep. Stan teased him about it the whole year after. "Wait until dark, Bobber," he'd say around twilight. It got to be a troop one-ninety-six catch phrase.

But it is that time now, and Stan is still at the dock slapping his feet in the water. Bill is at the fly pumping up the Coleman lantern and Bob is cutting himself a piece of the pie Zack baked the day before, levering his thin arms into it with a knife.

Zack skids down Cook Hill, his heels digging and popping on the rocks in the path. When he pushes by the table to get to the mess caginet where the pie is, Bill sets down his cards.

"I called into town," he says. "They've got a double feature at the Liberty tonight...."

"I'd just as well stay here," Zack says.

"What do you think, Bob?"

Bob shrugs his shoulders and sorts his cards. "I don't care."

Bill takes off his glasses. Two white marks cross the bridge of his nose where the glasses have rested so long. His eyes are dark brown and droop into crows feet at the corners. Zack has only seen Bill without his glasses once before, when they were knocked off by a branch that day his dad and Bill cut down the birch trees on the path.

"You two sure you don't want to go?" Bill says, nodding his head in Bob's direction, Bob is intently sorting the cards in his hand, breathing deep, his nostrils flaring.

"Gin," Bill says, laying down his hand. He pushes his camp stool back from the table and stands. "I'm going to go for a walk," he says to Zack. He stoops beside Bob, as though he were going to put his hand on Bob's shoulder. Bob turns his face away from Bill and shuffles the cards. Then Bill strides out of camp into the darkness down the road, his arms swinging from his broad shoulders.

Zack forks a piece of the apple pie into his mouth.

"What'd ya think of my pie?" Zack says.

Bob looks up at Zack, the light from the lantern bright in his eyes.

"Well?"

"It was shitty, if ya really wanna know."

"What's wrong with it? Bill said it was--"

"Well, he was wrong."

"What's eating you, Bob?"

"Nothin's eatin' me. What's your problem?"

Zack leans on the corner of the table, and it shifts to one side so that Bob's cards slide into his lap.

"Do you have to sit on the table?"

"I'm not sitting on the table."

"What are you doing, then?"

"Just eatin' my pie, Bob. You got anything against that?"

Bob shuffles the cards and arranges them in a row, playing solitaire.

Zack raises a forkful of the pie to his mouth and a glossy apple slice drops onto the table.

"Do you have to eat like a pig?"

"Who said I was?" Zack clenches a fist at his side, then slowly opens his hand and sets it on his knee. The Coleman lantern hisses and Zack scratches his knee.

"Bob, you remember when we had that radio?"

Bob slaps down a card and picks up another from the top of the deck.

"Bob--"

"I heard ya. What about it?"

"You ever think about that, you know, back then?"

Bob stares at the cards in his hand. A smile curls at the corners of his mouth, and then he frowns, shakes his head, and crosses his arms over his chest.

"What do you want, Zack?" he says.

Zack can feel something soft inside himself curling up into a hard, hot ball.

"What do I want? What the hell is wrong with you, Bob?"

"You, that's what."

"Me? It's you who's been treatin' me like crap, Bob. What gives?"

Bob slaps a card down. "You are such a phony, Zack."

The hot ball in Zack's chest shoots out again, like flame, into his arms and legs, and his breathing comes short. Everything is twisting inside. Bob's nostrils flare.

"You think that just because...."

"Say it Bob."

"Like hell I will. You know."

"Say it, Bob. I wanna hear it from you."

"You think you're entitled to some kind of special treatment, don't you?"

"What do you mean, Bob?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

Zack reaches down and grabs Bob's neckerchief and pulls him to his feet.

"No, I don't know exactly what you mean. So why don't you tell me, Bob?"

Bob knocks Zack's hand off his neckerchief.

"I'm sick of you, Zack. You go around here all sad-eyed and make everybody feel sorry for you and then they give you things you'd never get otherwise." Bob points his finger at Zack. Bob's asthma slows him, and he wheezes: "You... are a... are a fake, Zack. And I don't know why... my dad doesn't see it."

Bill has stopped on the road out of camp, and Zack hopes he'll come and shut Bob up. But instead, Bill walks up to the tenting area and stands with his arms crossed over his chest, shaking his head.

"You've got some stick up your butt, Zack. All day long you've been acting like some fucking prince, telling everybody what to do. What gives you the right?"

"I was elected, Bobber, or don't you remember?"

Bobs lips twist, as though he has swallowed something bitter.

"Now I'm gonna tell you something, Zack," he wheezes, "You don't deserve that badge... you didn't earn it. Hear me? They gave it to you... because...."

"Because what, Bob?"

"You made 'em feel sorry for ya."

"Sorry for what?"

Bob glares at Zack, his mouth pursed.

"Sorry for what, Bob?" Zack says.

"Your dad, goddammit! That's what!"

"You gotta lot of gall, Bob--"

"Yeah? And you're full of shit... the way you're always actin' hurt and playin' up to my dad."

Zack raises a fist, and holds it level with his shoulder.

"You gonna hit me now?" Bob says.

Bill stands out in the field, his hands on his hips; he kicks at a tuft of grass.

"Go ahead, hit me," Bob says. "It'll... be some big deal... you beating on me... when I can't even breathe."

Zack is shaking.

"You know what you are, Bob?" he says. "You are a fucking cripple, that's what you are."

Bob's eyes well up. "And you are a goddamned daddy's boy, Zack... only now that your dad's dead, you're hanging onto mine."

"If Bill weren't standing out there I'd--"

"You'd what? My dad told me Frank was gutless, and I'll bet you are, too."

Zack stares across the field where Bill stands, and turns back to Bob.

"Don't you ever mention my father to me again."

Bill takes two long steps, then runs across the camping area toward the dining fly.

"Is this what you want so damn bad, Bob?" Zack says, grasping the blue pin on his shirt with his free hand. "Is this what you want?" Zack rips the badge from his pocket and yanks Bob so close that their noses nearly touch. Zack holds the badge up.

"You see this Bob?" Zack bends Bob's fingers back and forces the badge into his palm. "You take this, Bob, and you shove it up your ass."

The gravel road out of camp cuts through Zack's soft moccasins. It feels good, and he snaps his legs down hard and sharp until his feet are numb.

In front of the Sportsman's Zack scuffles in the road for a rock, finds a heavy grey one, and pitches it through the window over the kitchen. The glass shatters, sending big jagged pieces scudding down the yellow stucco. Inside Zack finds a big section of pipe in the cooler and he bashes holes through the plaster walls until the lath shows through underneath. The air in the room is thick with plaster dust, and Zack chokes on it.

"GODDAMN YOU! GODDAMN YOU GODDAMN YOU!" he yells, swinging the big pipe again and again. "Jesus, dad...."

Zack can't lift the heavy lead pipe anymore, and he leans against a broken wall. He drags the pipe outside, brushes the glass off the stoop with it, and sits, bracing his back on the warped railing, banging the pipe through the last rotten step. He thinks about morning and the long ride home. How they used to take turns riding in Bill's Studebaker and then in Frank's Buick, how in years past Stan and he sat in back, telling dirty jokes and playing hearts. Zack's dad always got Bill to stop at an ice cream stand in EauClaire, the Tastee Freeze with the huge cone on the roof. Bill and Frank would flip a quarter to see who would buy the "Lalapalooza's," those huge sundaes made with seven scoops of ice cream.

Zack tosses a piece of glass at the dock out front. The beams sag into the water and cattails thrust up through the broken cross pieces. Zack walks to the dock and sits. Bullfrogs bellow from the lily pads a few yards out, and overhead the stars are sharp as pins.

Then the headlights of Bill's Studebaker bend around the last stretch of dirt road into the lot, and shine through the Sportsman's broken windows so that squares of light slide around the walls and over the holes smashed in them.

Bill sits behind Zack on the dock.

Way, way off the Burlington Northern blows its horn through Danbury. Bill shifts his weight, and the cross pieces under him groan, brittle, wooden.

"Zack...."

Zack kicks a rotten board off the end of the dock and it splashes into the lake.

"Zack...."

"What?"

"I didn't come out here to talk at ya."

Zack holds his hands out at his sides. "Great. You want me to say I'm sorry?"

"No."

Zack rips a splinter off the dock and snaps pieces off it.

"What Bob said back there at camp isn't true, Zack; I always thought your father was a good man...."

Zack shakes his head.

"I've got your pin back, if you want it."

"You give it to Bob," Zack says, standing.

Bill holds Zack's eyes just a moment too long. "Okay," he says.

They walk back to the Studebaker and get in. Bill drives slow, his arm out the window. The air is cool and sharp with the smell of evergreen. Gravel pops and crackles under the tires. Halfway around to Flaming Pine, Bill stops and lights a cigar and offers one to Zack.

Zack wakes the next morning with dew on his face. Bill already has the stove going and bacon sizzles on the griddle. Bill flips the first big brown pancake on a tin plate and hands it to Stan and says, "Here, this ought to do ya."

Zack crawls out of his mummy bag and stretches. The ground is cold under his feet. The leaves rattle in the trees now, more than rustle,

like they did a week ago. Bill hands Zack a tin plate with bacon and two pancakes steaming on it. Zack sits at the table across from Bob and digs his knife deep into the margarine.

Around nine Ollie drives up in his forest-service-green truck. Zack, Bob, and Stan finish stacking the tents, tarps, and mess cabinets in Bill's rickety trailer while Bill and Ollie police the grounds. Ollie is smoking one of Bill's Swisher Sweets, and the smoke floats across the field, hanging low over the damp grass.

When the trailer is packed Bob and Stan get into the car. Bob reads a road map up front and Stan sits in the back.

"Get in," Stan says through the open window of the Studebaker.

"I'm going down to the lake," Zack says.

On the beach Zack knocks off his shoes, the terrible brown shoes he'll wear all year at school. Zack grips the coarse, yellow sand with his toes. The sand thins out off shore, and rocks, round red ones nearly as bright as blood, stretch out into the bull rushes south of the dock.

The dock feels slick under Zack's feet. He stands at the end, looking at the lake, silver-blue, the steam rising off it like clouds. When he squats down he can see rainbows in the steam.

A bass jumps, making a circle in the water. Zack stoops to run his fingers through the water, warm in the sharp chill of the morning. The pumpkinseed sunfish gather under the dock and a few brave ones jet out to nibble on his fingers. He tosses them pancake bits he's got in a plastic bag.

"Zack, you coming up?" Bill calls from the top of the bank.

"Be up in a minute," Zack yells, stepping down the dock to shore. He tugs on his shoes, and halfway up the path, stops, fixing it all in his mind, the steam rising off the water, the hot white dock, the green reeds, and the yellow sand. Yards down shore from the rushes Zack can see a small orange and blue shape lying on the sand.

"Zack!" Bill yells again.

Zack takes a deep breath, smelling the oily, sour creosote, the damp rot of leaves, and that thick, sweet lake smell. He rubs his hand down the trunk of a birch leaning over the path, tears a leaf off one of its branches, and stuffs it in his shirt pocket. Then he turns his back to the lake and climbs up and over the bank.

I MUST HAVE BEEN STARING

About the time my wife's lawyer sent out the divorce papers, I met Allison Sands at the Tripoli, a flophouse kind of place in Florence. It was hot that week, in the hundreds, and the vendors out front of the Piazza Annunziata were doing a terrific business selling half-frozen jugs of water to tourists. The heat was driving me crazy, and nights I sat by my window reading a copy of The Naked and the Dead, wiping the sweat off my face with a towel.

I got to the part where this tough guy, Robert Hearn, is having it out with a bastard named Cummings, and a light came on in the apartment across from mine. Through the opening in the curtains I saw a woman lying on her bed, reading a magazine. She was wearing a teddy, and every now and again she pinched it over her stomach and fanned herself. She turned a few pages, set the magazine on the floor and stood to turn off the overhead light. She undid the buttons down the front, and her breasts jutted proud and taut, a softer white than her reddish brown shoulders. She slipped the teddy down her legs, tossed it onto a chair, and turned to the window to pull her shades open. I picked up my book, and held it high. When I dared to look again, she lay on her bed reading, stretched out on her back.

I got up early the following morning and went down for breakfast. Lang Agnolo, the padrone, who I'd invited up for Scotch a few times, put me at a table overlooking the plaza. It was only nine, but already the sun had a fierce bite to it, and I pulled one of the blinds over the window to shield my face. Across the street women were haggling with a

vendor selling dresses and shirts. I watched the fat ones as they tried to squeeze into tiny dresses. The woman selling them watched, waiting for a seam to split or the material to rip. A bakery down the block opened its doors and the smell of fresh bread filled the street.

I sipped on a cup of cappucino, and finished eating a crusty roll I'd covered with sweet-butter and marmalade. Overhead the big fan blades turned, spinning flies around with them. An old couple, the Traegers, tottered in and then came the others, all bedraggled from the heat.

Lang ushered a woman to the table by the kitchen, and she said she wouldn't have it. She stood with her back to me, and I recognized her voice. Her and her fiance, or boyfriend, or whatever he was or they were, had argued at the table behind me one morning weeks before. He'd said she was suffocating him, watching him all the time, and she'd spit back that she knew what he was doing. Lang told me about it later, how the boyfriend had balled this girl upstairs while his friend was out sightseeing.

I looked up from my paper, and she caught my eye. For a second I wondered why she looked so familiar, and as she strode to my table I remembered, that face and tan shoulders.

"You mind if I sit with you?" she said, pulling out a chair.

"No," I said, ruffling my paper flat and folding it.

With her sitting across from me I felt pretty uncomfortable. I wondered if she'd seen me at the window.

"Coffee white," she said to Lang. "My name's Allison."

"Clay."

"Have you seen much around here?" Allison said. She straightened out her silverware and napkin and sat with her back straight.

"A fair amount," I said.

"It's been hot as hell lately, hasn't it? I've had my windows wide open."

I nodded.

She was damned pretty, maybe even beautiful, with her high cheekbones and blue eyes. She talked about the Uffizi, and the "Italian masters," Raphael, Botticelli, Michelangelo, while I slurped down the last of my luke-warm cappuccino. She pinched her shirt over her breasts and ruffled it.

"This heat's killing me."

"Me too."

The heat was killing me all right--on schedule with the papers this heat wave came, and now all the trees outside were shrivelling up and dying, but I didn't want to say anything like that, and after a while my face ached with the smile I'd cemented on it.

"Have you seen Da Vinci's drawings in the Uffizi?"

I said I had, and stared out over the cathedral. "They're great, aren't they? Beautiful, like the Botticellis." I wanted to say how all the statuary and paintings around Florence were melancholy and depressing.

Lang finally brought Allison her coffee. As she stirred cream and sugar into it, I noticed the white ring around the finger on her left hand, and glancing down at my own hand, saw that the sun had tanned the skin where the ring once was, but hadn't touched the deep groove.

I wondered what had happened to her and "Lance Romance," as I'd thought of her friend, the too "cool" and too "suave" intellectual with the hook nose. The second time Lang came up for a nightcap he told me how much Lance's terrible Italian amused him, how he'd been up in the room with not just one woman, but a few, and how he'd slapped Allison around pretty bad.

Allison seemed so calm, reading the paper and sipping her coffee, but for her eyes, which blinked too often and gave her away. I noticed that one of her teeth, a canine, hadn't come down with the others, and when she smiled she tried to cover it with the corner of her lip.

I figured if she was anything like I had been when Sharon left, I didn't need it, any of those crazy nights like the ones after I moved out to my new flat on the thirtieth floor of the Atwater Building in St. Paul. I was trying something new, the get strong by being totally alone plan, and beneath it I knew I was just being a coward, maybe, and was too messed up to let people get into my life. I'd gotten pretty depressed and didn't want to see anybody, and for a couple weeks I didn't even answer the phone.

One night I opened the window, drunk and all, and climbed onto the ledge. Downtown, a red neon ball flashed over the Holiday Inn, and people shuffled out from a late show at the State Theater.

I got this wild-hair, sitting on the ledge, and I stood, made like a swan diver, just teasing myself, feeling the spring in my legs and arching my chest out into the darkness above the ant sized cars in the parking lot, and damn near fell when I lost my balance.

Allison looked up from her coffee and smiled, girlish, and I said, "Meet me at the Uffizi, after dinner." I didn't really want to say it, and it took both of us by surprise.

She looked out the window, following a man buzzing up the street on a red Vespa.

"All right." She turned back to her coffee and took a sip. "What time?"

Around seven it was still in the nineties. The streets were crowded and dusty and hot. I sat under the Statue of David, waiting for Allison, sweat running down my forehead. Out of all the people lumbering from place to place in the heat, I picked her out in a second. She seemed to float across the plaza, her sun-dress billowing behind her. We got a bottle of wine at the Calimala Rossa, across the plaza from the Uffizi. We drank it out of plastic cups, sitting on a bench, watching the lights come on over the Cathedral.

"How long have you been at the Tripoli?" Allison said.

"About a month. How about you?"

"Just a week or two," she said, rubbing the toes of her tennis shoes over the dirty sidewalk. A grey and green pidgeon hobbled by the bench, looking for a handout.

"Beat it, sky-rat," I said, jumping up to chase it down the walk as it coo-oooooed.

We bought another bottle, walked over to the Medici gardens, and sat at the Poseidon fountain with our feet in the cool water. The wine

made me woozy, and in the long red light, Allison threw spouts of water up.

"Hold out your glass, Allison," I said, pouring until the wine flowed over the sides and onto her hand. She dipped her hand in the water and splashed me. I shook the water off my face and set the bottle on the walk behind me.

Allison splashed me again and I stood, locked hands with her, and we pushed each other around the fountain, water up to our knees, trying to knock each other in. I was just goofing around, and then Allison jabbed me in the solar plexus with her elbow, and dug her fingernails into the top of my hands. Her teeth set on edge, she tried to catch me in the groin with her knee. I got mad and twisted her arm behind her, got one of my legs around hers, and we toppled in, gasping and splashing. Behind us people had gathered and they laughed as we stepped dripping from the fountain.

"Look what you did to my shirt," Allison said, holding out her arms. Her shirt clung to her breasts, transparent, and where I'd grabbed her going down the shirt had ripped, all the way down the side.

I got out my wallet, and pulled three soggy five thousand lire notes from it.

"Here, take fifteen thousand lire for your lousy shirt!" I said with as much bravado as I could. I threw the bills at her and walked back up to the Tripoli.

I put on some clean clothes and went out to my favorite place, the Cafe Colonna. I got a cappucino and sat watching the tourists and the

clowns. There was a sword-swallower, too, and I wondered how he got that blade, dull or not, to go down so far without hurting himself. I was still pretty pissed at Allison, her trying to kick me in the groin, and when I saw her walk by I turned my back and hoped she wouldn't see me.

She slapped her purse on the table, and sat down.

"Buy me a goddamned drink, Clay."

"Buy it yourself," I said.

She was wearing a red dress, blood red, and her blue eyes were electric. She ordered a bottle of Campali, and when it came she had the waiter set out two glasses. She filled both of them and held one out to me.

"Truce?" she said.

I took the glass and had half a mind to throw it in her face, but instead, I downed it.

"That was a pretty mean thing you did."

"What about you? It's okay for you to throw me in the water but it isn't okay for me to throw you in?"

"I'm not gonna fight with you, Allison," I said.

I guess she didn't like the way I just walked off after I drank her Campali, because she ignored me the week after. When I got up late, she'd come in for breakfast and Lang would wink at me from her table. I felt strange, having watched her that night, and I thought about her a lot, even got mad when I saw her with other men around Florence. She really put on a show if she knew I was around--laughed and flirted with the swarthy Italians in their skin-tight clothes. Lang told me she'd

gone upstairs with a few of them. By Friday I was feeling I had to make her want me somehow, and I got up late just to run into her at breakfast. When she came in I walked right over to her table and sat down.

"Truce," I said.

"I think it's too late," she said, smiling. She remembered her tooth and dropped her smile.

"I like that tooth of yours," I said. "I think it's kinda sexy." And I really did feel that way--without it she'd be too pretty, an untouchable, but I knew she hated it, felt it was a terrible flaw. "I'm going fishing tomorrow, if you'd like to--"

She raised her paper and made as if she were reading it. Lang stopped by the table and Allison said, "Would you ask this man to leave my table?"

I sat by my window that night, trying to read Mailer's book. It was sheer agony, glancing over at Allison's window time and again, and I finally threw the book into my clothes closet and went out to the Calimala Rossa, where I drank a bottle of rot-gut.

When I got back to my room her light was on, and I lay on my bed, sweating in the damned heat, rolling from my back to my side until I finally went to my window. Under her night-light, she fondled her self, rubbed oil into her groin and arched her back, over and over again, her taut breasts rising and falling with the rhythm of her hand, her mouth a red Oh. I got a sick feeling watching her, a tearing in my guts, and thought about David and Bathsheba, how crazy-intense I was getting, my heart racing and legs shaking.

Around six-thirty the next morning I went down to the kitchen. Lang was reading the paper and he brought me a cup of coffee and a hard roll. I could see there was a note in my mail slot over the reception desk. I figured it was more divorce shit, my wife's lawyer wondering why I hadn't sent the forms back. Then Allison strode into the room, wearing a pair of khaki pants and deck shoes. She dropped into the chair across from me and said, "Am I late?"

"I thought you weren't going?"

"You didn't get my note?"

"No, can't say I did. And anyway, who told you when I was going?"

"Lang did. I waited up half the night for you, but you didn't answer your phone. I saw your light go on for a second there, but you must have gone out again, huh?"

She smiled at me, her eyes teasing, her lip curled over her tooth.

"Yeah, I was out all night," I said, stirring a cube of sugar into my coffee. "But I had to come back to get a few lire."

We took a bus to Piombino and slept most of the way down, even though the driver weaved all over the road. On the waterfront it was cool, with a breeze blowing off the ocean, salt-sweet, and after the ride it was nice to sit and watch the gulls dip into the water where the fish gathered.

Allison took my arm and we walked by the boats up to Pecori's place, where fishermen had the morning's catch laid out on ice: flounder, red snapper, and cuttle fish. Pecori's "office" sat in the middle of the block, its green awnings down. Across the facade of the building was

painted "Giraldi De Pepi," and beneath it was a tin fish, the blue paint all peeled off but for the head, where a white tennis ball with a black button in the middle stared.

I'd been in twice before, and Pecori shook my hand and smiled at Allison, the widest smile I'd seen in a long time. He had a black moustache as thick as rope and his teeth were yellow and crooked.

"It's gonna be a good day," he said. "There's three others comin' though, and we gonna have to wait. Okay? Maybe you can check out the town, say come back by nine?"

Allison wanted a basket and some food, and bottles of wine.

"Two bottles," she said. "And how about some cheese?"

"You ever been ocean fishing?"

"Sure," she said, "I went with my father a few times back east."

"You're sure now?"

"Of course I'm sure."

Eight foot swells rocked the boat as we diesel away from shore. Pecori stood on the flying bridge, the wheel in hand, yelling to the boys on the bow. They tied lures, five to a line, on our rods and jabbed lantern fish through the rusty hooks. A breeze from the east tossed the diesel exhaust back over the boat, and at times it smelled like we were in a closed garage with a car running in it. The late people, Eric, his wife, and mother-in-law, stood in the stern, watching Piombino disappear. Their clothes were all neatly pressed and clean, cheery yellows and pinks. I caught Pecori's eye and he winked and shook his head.

About fifteen miles out, a school of flounder shot through a wave and

Pecori shut down the diesel. I watched the island off our starboard side and the boys brought the rods from the bow and we all cast in. Allison was trying to figure out the drag release on her reel, and I reached around her to push up the lever on the side.

"I can do it myself," she said. The line went out until it hit the knot at the end, and she tried to reel up but only got a clicking.

"Now can I show you how?"

"No," she said, turning her back to me.

While Allison struggled with her rod, the swells got higher, and the old lady vomited over the side. Eric took her under deck, but the exhaust was so bad he had to put her up with the boys. They were reeling in red-snappers, one after the other.

We all got a few, but for Allison. She was pretty green in the face, clutching her rod over the gunwhale.

"Here," I said, handing her my rod. "Try this one...."

"Get out of the way," she said, steadying herself with one knee on the picnic basket we'd bought in town.

"You want some more of that wine?" I said.

She leaned against the gunwhale and retched. I held her around the waist so she didn't fall overboard.

"Get me off this boat," she said.

I guess I should have told her the trick to the whole thing. After all, I'd been sick the first time out. "You just watch the Elba, there." Percori had said, pointing at the island. "Don't take your eyes off it."

On the bus, Allison slept, her head resting on my shoulder. I felt

bad for what I'd done to her on the boat, or what I hadn't done--one of those sins of omission--and held her tighter, thinking I'd make it up to her somehow, maybe take her to the Colonna in Florence. She hadn't been able to stomach the snappers Pecori fried up for us at the Giral di Pepi, and I'd eaten nearly all of them, with her eyeing me coolly from across the table, her face ashen.

I didn't see her at the Tripoli for a few days, and when I did, she was with some character who must have had a cucumber tucked up his pants. He was hanging all over her, always an arm draped across her shoulder, a hand on her knee or at the small of her back. I got to calling him the drape, and I saw him with her everywhere, the Colonna, the Calimala Rossa, Sartori's, kissing her neck and trying to fondle her until she slapped him.

A week to the day after we'd been fishing, Allison had Lang call her when I came down for breakfast. Lang and I were getting to be pretty good Scotch buddies, and he clued me in on the latest developments around the Tripoli. He said the Traegers had called in the middle of the night because they thought the drape was beating Allison. And sure enough, when Allison came down the stairs and turned into the dining area I could see she had one hell of a shiner. With her usual aplomb she strode to my table, dragged a chair out and sat. She smiled, brief and mechanical.

"Hi," I said. "You get over your sea sickness?"

She looked out the window, and slowly turned back to the table.

"You busy tonight?" she said.

"No. Why?"

"Didn't you say you owed me a dinner?"

I'd asked her if she'd have dinner with me at the Colonna that night when we got back from fishing, but she refused, said she didn't want to ever talk to me again. She said I'd purposely made her sicker by eating all the fish at Pepi's, and I said she was right--seeing her on the bed those nights had me frustrated, and on the boat I'd wanted to hurt her for it.

"What about the drape?" I said. "How does he figure into this?"

"Who?"

"That bodyguard of yours with the cucumber in his pants."

"He doesn't figure into this. Just dinner. Yes or no?"

We ate at the Degli Albizi. I think that was the hottest night of all, still in the mid-nineties at seven. Everything looked like it was melting in the heat, and the seafood on the big platter in the center of the room smelled bad, sour and fishy. Hot puffs of air came in off the street and I felt ragged, a bit angry at Allison, because she insisted the dinner was on me since I'd asked her. This she said after we'd finished and got the check for thirty thousand lire. I was fanning my chest with my shirt, thinking about how nice it would be to smack some sense into Allison, when the drape came in. He marched toward our table with his fists clenched at his sides, and Allison said, "Don't listen to anything he has to say. All right?"

"I'll bet."

I wasn't really surprised, and in the heat, with him charging toward me, I caught him square in the mouth and sent him crashing into a fat

lady eating a salad. He ran at me again and I popped him one in the eye, a good, solid, Thwack!

I went up Torrigiani Avenue, bordering the Arno River, and Allison followed behind me.

"I didn't mean for that to--"

"Bullshit, Allison."

"Really, I--"

I turned around and caught her by the arm.

"I don't know what the hell it is you want, but I don't like you using me to take care of your business. See? Why didn't you punch out that son-of-a-bitch yourself, maybe knee him in the balls, if you're so goddamned tough?"

She followed me back to the Tripoli, stumbling and crying. I slowed down and walked beside her with my hands in my pockets. At the Tripoli we sat on the bench out front, watching kids feed the pigeons across the street. I felt sorry for her, with her eye puffed up and that bastard after her, but I couldn't think of anything to say to her. I'd done the same kind of thing when Sharon left, ran around and got in trouble.

One night I brought a biker-girl to my Atwater flat, and sitting on my bed, drinking Tokay and watching the snake tatoo wrinkle across her breasts, I knew I couldn't take much more. That was the night I stood out on the ledge.

Sharon and I weren't officially separated then, just living in different parts of town. I'd lost my job at Macalester College in

Minneapolis due to a cut-back in faculty, and I was broke and Sharon was sick of it. She was working with the University Hospitals in St. Paul, and I guess the sight of all those Mercedes Benz got to her. She told me she was seeing other people, and what could I say? Then came the stories. There was one about an ophthalmologist who said, "I'm an animal and you're my meat." I guess he was okay for Sharon, though, because he drove a BMW. I just wanted to kill the bastard.

Allison had broken a heel running over the cobblestones on Torrigiani Avenue, and she turned the broken shoe in her hands, shaking her head.

"Look, Allison, I'm sorry about yelling at ya," I said. "It's all a bunch of crap right now."

"Yeah," she said.

"I just don't want you to feel bad on account of me, okay?"

I stood, and turned to go inside, and she said, still watching the kids in the street, "You wanna come up and talk?"

Her room was a mess, magazines strewn all over and clothes heaped on the floor. She had her window open, and a hot breeze buffeted a mobile hanging over her dresser. She opened a bottle of wine, poured two glasses, then handed me the bigger of the two, and sat on her bed, her legs crossed.

"Cheers," she said, lifting her glass.

"I suppose so," I said.

I sipped my wine, waiting for her to say something. The room seemed to get hotter, and she unbuttoned her blouse and fanned herself like the

first night I'd seen her.

We listened to her radio, nervously eyeing each other, and I asked her where she was from. She said she'd grown up in Jupiter, Maine, but she'd been living in Boston for eight years.

"Jupiter...."

She sat still a moment, her head cocked to the right.

"It was really pretty.... In the winter my dad took us to the big hills outside of town--"

I held my glass out and she filled it.

"--and we'd go sledding, whole afternoons, bundled up, bumping down the hills." She smiled, and took a sip from her glass, then shook her head. "My dad got to slapping everybody around, especially my mother... I don't know. Jupiter. People ask me where I'm from, imagine this in Boston: 'Where you from?' 'Jupiter,' I say, and they always go, 'Come on, where are ya really from?' and I say 'Jupiter, goddammit!' And then they say 'All right, I can take a joke..., ' and I say, 'It isn't a joke,' but most the time I can tell they don't believe me."

"I could see you coming from Jupiter," I said.

Allison put down another glass of wine and got to talking about Atillier Prohl, the school she was attending in Boston. Watercolors. That was her thing. She opened her night-stand drawer, scooted what looked like a hair dryer out of the way, and slid out three watercolors, one of the Piazza Annunziata and two nudes. They were beautiful,

delicate, meticulously painted. I didn't know what to say. I must have been staring.

"What do you think?"

"They're beautiful," I said. She took a sip of her wine and picked up one of the nudes, and I got a bit of a shock.

"I had a hell of a time getting this right, and I still don't--"

She turned her head to the side, so I could see her in profile.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Did I get it right?"

The watercolor was of a woman kneeling, drawing her thick hair behind her, her back turned three-quarters round, so there was only a hint of breast below her raised arm.

"The face," Allison said, looking at me askance, "is the face right?"

We finished the bottle of wine and opened another, and when I'd had enough, and got to thinking about Allison on the bed those nights, I said, "Allison, I think I'm gonna go."

She looked up from her glass, teasing.

"More reading? You like to read, don't you?"

I felt my face tingle.

"Yeah," I said. "I do a fair amount of reading."

"I've seen you a few nights." She pulled back her curtains and pointed to my window. "You've got that one right... there."

"It's pretty cool with the breeze coming in."

"Uh huh. I'm sure it is."

"I've been reading Mailer's book, the one about the war." I pushed back my chair. "If you'd like to read it I could--"

"Do you have a good view from your window, I mean of the plaza?"

"It's fine, I guess. Not much to see--"

"Uh huh," she said, nodding her head.

"I don't know what you're getting at, Allison."

She smiled. "Don't you...."

My face burned, and I just wanted to get out of her room.

"Do you want me?" she said.

Something fierce and mad in me said, "Yes."

Nights we drank Campali, and wandered around the streets till three and four in the morning, and like teenagers, we found parked cars, and places behind the Medici gardens where we'd rut, drunk, not giving a damn who might see us.

Allison's breasts were always slick with sweat when we finished, and my hair was sopping wet. She never climaxed at first. But later, when she did, it scared me, how she arched her back, and her whole body shook.

"I must be warming up to you," she said, slapping down on my thighs and twisting her hips.

We never got up before noon, and some mornings we didn't bother to shower before we went down for breakfast. We smelled like sex, musty, and our clothes were wrinkled from lying in them, or on them. My electric shaver broke, and I didn't bother with a safety razor. Allison said she liked me unshaven, so I let it go, and she wore her hair in a

ponytail. I thought we both looked like psych-ward patients, all disheveled and haggard.

I hadn't felt so alive, or so empty, since Sharon left, and Allison was beautiful, even as wild as she had gotten to look, her hair tangled and eyes hot. During the days, everything shimmered in the heat, and nights the streets cooled, the cobblestones like hard loaves of bread fresh out of the oven.

Two weeks or so after that first night up to Allison's place, we were at the Colonna, eating dinner. Allison was wearing a dress I'd bought her, and I had gotten a rose from a vendor and surprised her with it. We were talking about Peter Sellers, how funny it was in the Panther films when Kato would jump out of the freezer or something and attack him, and Allison set down her fork.

"I think I'm in love with you," she said.

The way it came out of nowhere like that I thought she was teasing me and shot back, "I love you too," grinning idiotically.

She bent to her plate, her cheeks crimson.

"Hey, Allison, I'm sorry. I thought you were--"

"You don't have to love me," she said.

"But I do, Allison," I said, as though I were pleading with her to believe me.

"Don't lie to me, Clay," she said. She pushed her chair back from the table and strode from the restaurant into the street, and I rushed out after her.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"For Christ's sake, Allison, I love you. Don't do this."

"Don't do this.... Goddamn you, what are you doing?"

I took her arm and she slapped me away.

"Don't touch me."

"I said 'I love you,' Allison."

I followed her up Torrigiani Avenue, and at the Tripoli went up to her room behind her and she slammed her door and locked it before I could get a foot in edgewise. She screamed, and threw something heavy against the door, and when it was quiet I said, "Allison, open the door."

"Go to hell," she said.

"Allison...."

"You heard what I said. Go To Hell!"

"Fuck you then!" I yelled. "Fuck you and--"

"Wouldn't you just love to!" she screamed back.

"You aren't so hot baby--"

And then she threw something glass against the door, and it shattered, and she screamed again. Lang stood at the top of the stairs, and I went down for a drink with him.

I put messages in her mailbox for a few days; Lang told me she'd thrown away all my notes without reading them, so I tried to call her. I finally bought two train tickets up to Gotthard pass, and stuck them on Allison's door with a thumbtack, a picture of the Berner Alps I'd gotten out of a magazine under them. Across the tickets I wrote, "Radio said it snowed last night."

The train out of Florence left at five, and we picked up dinner on

the train a few hours later, headed through Milano.

"I don't know what the hell I'm doing on this train," Allison said.
"If it weren't so damn hot in Florence--"

"You'd do what?"

She stared out the window at the rows of butter-colored houses streaming by. They all had tile roofs that glowed red in the late afternoon sun.

"Is it really snowing up there?"

"It was last night," I said. "They got ten inches in Zermatt."

Further north the air cooled, and we opened the window in our berth. The air was fresh, like ice, with a touch of pine, and I wrapped a jacket around my shoulders. Allison was already asleep, curled up on her seat across from me.

Just after dawn we got off the train at Grindlewald, and had breakfast at the foot of the Pfinstegg glacier. The slopes were green, green, green below the snowline, and water shot over high white ledges in plumes of white and blue. I was ecstatic. Jesus. And while the sun was still coming over the glacier we took the tram halfway up and climbed the rocks in our tennis shoes, and by noon we'd made it to the first hut, where other climbers sat drinking wine out of boda skins.

"God, this is...." I threw off my day pack, raised my arms, and stretched. "I can't believe it."

Allison smiled, "It reminds me of Maine."

She'd put on a red sweater, her blue eyes bright and smiling.

"You want something to drink?" I said.

"No. Do you?"

We hiked the last few hundred yards to the glacier, and I rubbed snow in Allison's face and she chased me till she got ahold of my leg. She stuffed snow down my shirt and I was laughing so hard I couldn't stop her. Then we slid to the path on our stomachs, like otters are supposed to do, until we were sopping wet and cold. The Swiss down at the hut were watching us, pointing and waving. They laughed too, and yelled obscenities up the mountain.

In Grindlewald we picked up my things at the train station and found a campsite, just east of the Pfinstegg, then pitched my tent.

"You wanna take a shower before we eat," Allison said, throwing her wet sweater onto my pack.

"What kind of question is that? I'm friggin' soaked. Of course I'm gonna...."

Allison smiled and gave me a sidelong glance.

"Do you want to?" she said.

That night I told her I loved her. And I did.

In the morning we took the train back to Florence, rattled through Bellinzona, Magadino, into Lugano, where at noon, it was already one-hundred-and-three. We were in a heat wave, the highest temperatures in a hundred years, one of the porters said. When we got off the train in Florence the hot air from the Piazza Annunziata hit us like flame, and I bought one of those half-frozen jugs of water and gulped it down until my forehead felt as though it would split.

I handed the jug to Allison and she did the same, though more out of

thirst than longing for the cold. At the Tripoli Lang had two small fans on his desk. He sat on a stool between them, reading a magazine. I went up to my room and doffed my pack. The room was dry, and stuffy, and I opened my window. Hot, fetid air from the Piazza, thick with the smell of exhaust and dirt, filled my room. I grabbed the towel off my dresser and wiped the sweat from my face.

I got that after-vacation emptiness, only worse in the heat, and I jogged around the hall to Allison's room and knocked on her door. She sat on the bed, drinking a glass of wine.

"Don't stand there," she said. "Come in."

She handed me a glass of wine and I tossed it down and she filled my glass again.

"So what do you think?" I said.

"About what?"

"Being back in Florence."

"You know I love this place...."

She filled my glass again. I felt like I was sweating red wine. She had the bottle in a nest of ice cubes, and I shoved my hand into them, pulled out a big shiny piece, and tossed it into my mouth, feeling the cold work through my cheeks.

Allison rubbed my shoulders and pressed up against my back, hot. I wanted to scream.

"Make love to me like you did up in Grindlewald," she said.

"Allison, let's get the hell out of this place, at least until this heat's over...."

She set her glass on her dresser and pulled me down to the bed.

"I want you inside me."

"Allison, let's go."

"I want you now," she said.

I couldn't stand the thought of it, the sweat, but I was aroused anyway; she was so beautiful and terrible lying there, and when I unbuttoned her dress the heat held me like a fist and she drove her hips, slapping into mine, until I was exhausted and I held her while she rubbed herself.

After, we went to the Calimala Rossa, got a liter of Campali, and ate a luke-warm salad. Lots of mayonnaise, and I wondered if it was safe to eat. The wine had me going and I didn't give a goddamn and we lurched out to the cathedral and watched the clowns and the sword swallows. When a sword swallower had the blade down deep, Allison whispered in my ear, "That remind you of something?"

And back at the Tripoli, we made love again, and lay together all night, sweating.

Days we wandered around the Uffizi, and Allison wrapped her arm through mine.

"Do you love me?" she'd say.

"Yes," I'd say. But I was always thinking of Grindlewald when I said it, and she felt me pulling away.

She wanted me more often then, and her riding me was more expert, and pressed the right places, and we tied ourselves into sweaty knots on the sheets, rocking the bed, Allison shuddering, "Not yet, not, not... Oh...."

And I held back, sometimes so sore I was numb and got no release myself and I faked it, just to get away from her.

The hottest night of them all, we went to the Colonna. I'd gotten a letter from Sharon around noon and was still pretty pissed about it. In her letter Sharon bitched about the divorce papers, and what a so-and-so I was for not sending them back pronto, and I could have wrung her neck--five years together and not one "I think about you," or "What are you doing?"

"Don't look so glum," Allison said.

I shrugged my shoulders and stared out across the Piazza Annunziata where the night crowd was gathering, the actors and the clowns and the people milling around with styrofoam cups of wine in their hands. My shirt was soaked and my head throbbed.

"Do you want the rest of your salad?" Allison said.

"No."

She forked it onto her plate, and with her mouth full, said, "This is where I get the ice."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. I know one of the waiters.... Anyway--"

"What of it."

"Give me a chance, will you? Christ you're a son-of-a-bitch tonight."

"Sorry. It's the heat."

"How does a margarita sound to you?"

"Yeah, right. In this place?"

Allison waved over the shortest waiter in the place, a little guy going bald. When the margaritas came, I held mine in my hands, oh god, so cold and fresh. I rolled the glass over my forehead and cheeks, and held the green ice in my mouth. I'd always hated tequila before, but it tasted wonderful that night.

I suppose I drank a few too many, because I really staggered, walking back to the Tripoli with Allison, and the heat came off the cobblestones, rancid smelling like vomit. In her room we lay on the bed, fondling each other, and she was wet, and excited, and touching her. I could have been a hundred miles away I was so numb.

"Sit, over there," Allison said, pointing to the chair by the door.

"Why?"

"You'll see...."

She opened the drawer of her night stand, the drawer she'd taken the watercolors from that night, and got out a vibrator.

She was drunk too, and she smiled, a sick smile and she plugged the vibrator into the wall.

"Don't, Allison," I said. "This is too much. You won't--"

"Do you want to watch me?" she said, turning it on so it hummed.

"Stop it, Goddammit!" I said. "Allison, this is wrong. Don't--"

She bucked her hips, took it inside her, and I felt sick, the blackness, the ripping apart thing in me watching, wanting, aching, but furious too, wanting to hurt her.

I closed my eyes and the slick clicking got louder.

Sharon had bought one of these things when we were at our worst--

she'd said it was always the right shape, and then she smiled, a mean, tight-lipped smile, and I'd wanted to put one of my fists through her face and she said, "Oh, you're a real man, now, aren't you? You're gonna hit a woman. That should be a real challenge...." I stood with my back to the front door, my fists clenched at my sides. I was afraid I would really hurt her.

"Watch," Allison said.

She leaned against the headboard and her body trembled, as though she were holding back against something. She looked over at me and rhythmically raised her hips and smiled.

I bolted out of my chair and wrested the thing from her hands and she pounded on my back.

"What is wrong with you!"

"Fuck me," she said.

"This is disgusting, Allison."

"You're disgusting!"

"What do you call--"

"I know you watched me," she said, her eyes like hot pokers.

"I suppose you really got a thrill out of it, me up there--"

"You really are dense, aren't you?" she said, gritting her teeth and shoving me up and back on the bed. "You think I'd wait up all night so you could sit there and watch me?"

I loosened my grip on her wrists.

"Get off, you're hurting me," she said, jabbing at me with her knees.

"Stop it."

"Get off."

"Say you love me." I twisted her wrists and she shook the pain off with her shoulders.

"I hate you!"

She arched her back and the headboard banged against the wall and the Traegers pounded back. I was hard again, and there was a numbness in my head, and I felt a raw power in my hands.

"Is this what you want?"

"GET OFF ME!"

She bit my arm, and I let go and she jumped to her feet and swung her hand around and caught me on the ear. I heard a blasting in my head and Mr. Traeger yelled,

"Stop it in there or I'll call the police!"

I ran to Allison's window and put my head out. "This is none of your goddamn business, Traeger!"

Something hit me in the back, and I spun around and knocked my head on the window casing.

"Get out!" Allison yelled, pointing to the door.

"Like hell I will!"

She spit at me, and I swung around to slap her in the face and she stepped into the heel of my hand, caught it on the bridge of her nose, and I felt her head whip back. She sat on the floor, blood running to her mouth. She touched her lips with her fingers, then ran at me and grabbed my hair and I hefted her onto the bed and pinned her against the

sheets and she slammed her hips into mine, her eyes hard like porcelain, until I spewed into her and she ripped the hair in her hands from my head.

I rolled onto my back and we both stared at the ceiling, breathing hard. Lang knocked on the door and asked if we were all right. I told him to go away.

It seemed like hours, lying there, and I fought not to say I was sorry, because I wasn't. It all seemed so strange, so different, as though even the room had changed, had become more angular and hard.

I slid off the end of the bed and pulled on my pants and shirt and shoes. At the door I stopped, as if to say something, but Allison turned her head away, and I stepped into the hallway and went around to my apartment. In the bathroom, in front of the medicine-cabinet mirror, I swabbed the scratches on my face and head with iodine. My eyes were bloodshot and hard like a bird's. I wouldn't apologize this time, not like I'd done with Sharon after she'd slammed me up against the door that night. "Go ahead, hit me," she said, and I'd grabbed her around the throat, told her I'd break her in two if I wanted, and when she ran upstairs and packed I asked her to forgive me.

This time I wouldn't run to anyone asking for forgiveness. I didn't need anyone's permission to feel like I'd done the right thing. I hadn't. And neither had Allison. I screwed the top back onto the bottle of iodine, checked my face once more for scratches, and snapped out the light and crossed the room to my bed.

Early the next morning I called Lang to tell him I was checking out. I took a shower and packed, and waiting for him to come up, stood at my window. The sun cut through the alleys and made big rectangles of light on the cobblestones. The east wall of the Tripoli glowed, and through the window I could see Allison lying on her bed, her hands curled under her chin like a little girl. I slid Mailer's book off the window sill, turned to the last page, then tossed the book onto the dresser.

It wasn't yet eight when I crossed the Piazza Annunziata to the railway station and bought a ticket to Zermatt. The train didn't leave until nine, and I sat on a bench, eating a croissant and drinking a cup of coffee. Maybe, I thought, I could call her, and she would go with me. I missed her crazy smile, with the tooth of hers. And lord, lord, lord, I hoped the time went fast, because for a terrible moment I stood, intending to go get her out of bed--she'd looked so pretty--but made myself sit down again.

I smoked a cigarette and checked my watch. At eight forty-five I shouldered my pack and walked to the rear of the train, where I threw the pack in the baggage compartment and gave the conductor my ticket.

The train rolled northwest out of Florence, paralleling the Arno River, then climbed the hills on the north end. I watched the sun rise over the cathedral, the copper dome a cool green above the red tile roofs, and I was struck by the raw beauty of Florence for the first time, as though I'd never seen the city. I tried to place the Tripoli, and I thought of Allison and felt hard and mean and lonely, but I felt something solid too, and leaned back in my seat so the sun wouldn't shine in my eyes.